

Again, Tibs was annoyed at the restricted motion caused by his injured arm as he rubbed the oiled cloth against one of his bracers resting on his crossed legs.

“I can help with that,” the young man to his left said eagerly. Too eagerly for everyone’s comfort.

“I can manage,” Tibs replied.

He’d sat apart from the others, as he often did, planning on using essence to help with this, but Jeremy, one of the guards to join them from the city, had noticed him and sat next to him. Then another of the guards was there, and another. At some point, a firepit was dug and now there were too many for Tibs’s liking.

His first time with a caravan, Jeremy told them, and he was going to prove himself invaluable.

*Too damned eager*, Graiden had muttered when telling Tibs about him, but he’d still given the young man a chance.

Tibs remembered the first guard chief to give him a chance. She’d been older than Graiden, scarred from many fights, and hadn’t been impressed with Tibs’s young age. But she’d said everyone deserved a chance to prove themselves and had hired him.

Tibs was pretty sure he’d made her regret the decision, with how often he put himself underfoot trying to help with everything, even things he didn’t know enough about to be of help.

Horses had been new to him. Before then, he’d only watched them pull wagons, or with riders on their back.

The first one he’d touched had nearly trampled him, and had earned him a scolding to keep away. He’d been right back the next time one needed to be harnessed or saddle, getting in the way while thinking he was helping. Half the guards were constantly annoyed, the other amused. Those were the ones who remembered being as eager as he’d been.

So Tibs did his best to tolerate Jeremy’s constant attempts to help and be amused by them, instead of irritated.

“You know,” an older guard said, “I don’t think soaking that in oil is going to help it. You’re better off buying a new set.”

The enchantment on his bracers started failing years before, and Tibs hadn’t paid attention until the leather cracked for the first time. He’s already known enchantments could fail, but he’d expected centuries to pass before it happened, not a decade. He’d talked with scholars about it after, read books, and had learned that the good enchantments, the big ones, could easily last that long, but smaller ones rarely had that kind of lifespan. Even well made, those needed to be retuned every few decades, if they were well made.

He’d thought Sto had made them expertly, but now he had to remember that Sto was younger than Tibs had been when he made them. It might have been the best Sto was able to make, but it hadn’t meant they would last indefinitely.

Tibs had asked about sorcerer’s reserves then. What happened when those failed? They didn’t, the scholar had told him, at least not without someone causing them to fail, and that tended to be explosive. The essence within the reserves maintained the structure of the crystals used to make them. And crystals, by their closeness to the

elements, lent themselves to resisting degradation.

He thought about finding a sorcerer to fix the enchantment, but he didn't know how to go about finding one who'd be able to see through the attunement Sto had put on it so Tibs was the only one able to sense the weave or reserves. And he didn't know if he'd be able to trust them not to steal them from him because of what they were.

Tibs had never forgotten Jackal's comment that someone clever enough could lie to someone with light as their element. And Tibs had done that a few times with Harry, Kraggle Rock's guard leader, who had had Light.

So he'd endeavored to maintain them the way everyone else did.

"They were given to me by my mother," Tibs said, turning it, then going back to rubbing the oiled cloth.

"So? Tell her they were damaged beyond repair. They certainly look it."

"Or have the new ones etched so they'll look like these. She won't know."

"Let him be," Jeremy said with more heat than Tibs was needed. "If my mother had given me something, I wouldn't just replace it."

Tibs glances at the young man, but he was looking away.

Maybe they shared something other than how eager they were to please their first time.

Tibs finished oiling the bracer, then dried the inside before slipping his arm in it and... He looked around but only received smirks. It was his left arm, and Jeremy was to his left, so he stifled the sigh.

"Jeremy, can you lace it closed?"

The smile the young man gave him could have powered an etching to take down a city wall if it had been essence, and he proceeded to adjust it, pulled Tibs's sleeve up in the process.

He didn't react as the act exposed the black covering his light brown skin, even if he felt too many eyes on him. He rarely showed it, and never on purpose, even if he has stories ready to explain it.

He'd tried to make the weave no larger than his bracer, but making something that hid not only the brand from sight and senses, but kept it from leaving behind essence guild adventurers could use to track him had resulted in something complex. He expected a sorcerer with centuries of experience and access to more books than Tibs wanted to count would have been able to make something that would have been easy to hide, but Tibs was only a thief with stolen knowledge and nowhere near the time to train making weaves the best way they could be.

By the time he'd made something that did what he needed, the weave stretched from the brand at his wrist past his elbow. Because he'd needed the brand itself to not be visible, he'd made the whole thing black, the easiest thing to do because he'd used darkness for the weave.

"That's impressive ink," one of the guard said, leaning forward so she could see better in the firelight. "I don't think I've ever seen one that doesn't show the needle lines."

Tibs shrugged.

Jeremy had the bracer comfortably tight, and he tied the lace. "Sorry," he whispered as he pulled the sleeve down over it.

Tibs shrugged and took the one from the arm in the sling off, wincing at the pain. Another week, and he'd be able to heal it. He should work on an etching that would speed up an injury's healing a little, for times when he was caught before healing them, but those were rare and required him not immediately healing himself so he could practice the etching.

Tibs had no intention of causing himself injuries simply to workout how to make that etching, and when he got hurt, he couldn't afford to remain that way if he wanted to survive.

"Do you have a matching one on that arm?" she asked.

Tibs shook his head and proceeded to oil the bracer.

"So, how did you get it?" she asked. "That isn't the kind of thing just anyone gets. And as good as it looks, that's expensive. You don't look rich." There was accusation in her tone.

"Like one of the rich kid would ever lower themselves to this kind of work," another said.

Tibs sighed. It wasn't because he had the stories that he liked telling them. He needed to tell a version of them every so often so he wouldn't forget what had happened, but it didn't mean he enjoyed it.

"My—" He swallowed, forcing himself to remember her cooling body as he tried to seek comfort against her, not yet understanding what it had meant. What those men had done to Mama. Trying again was difficult. "My mother died when I was young." His hand tightened against the bracer, wishing it was her hand. "We didn't live in the best part of the city."

The broken walls of the hole they lived in, buildings leaning against each other so much even now, he didn't understand how it was they hadn't fallen and killed all of them.

"I fell in with people who helped me stay alive. You wouldn't think them good people, but they were all I had. No one would come where we lived to help someone who'd nearly lost everything he had." Tentatively, he pulled the sleeve up. "They put this on me a few years later. They had an inker." Tibs shuddered. "Strange woman with eyes..." he swallowed. "It hurt, but I wasn't going to show it. This was to prove I was going to go far among them. To admit to pain was to fail them." He hurried to cover it up. "I had to kill a man afterward. Not because he was trying to hurt me or steal from me, but just because they told me to. I knew we weren't good people. My street didn't let good people live there. But I hadn't understood how bad they were until they told me to do that."

"Did you do it?" Jeremy asked softly.

"I had to." He winced as he reflexively went to rub his arm. "They'd have seen it as a betrayal if I hadn't. And people who betrayed them didn't live, *that* I knew." He let out a shuddering breath. "But I planned my escape from that day on."

He waited for them to prod him. Usually this was enough, but sometimes—

"That inker?" she asked, sounding afraid. "What about her eyes?"

He waited to answer, and when he did, he whispered. "They were broken."

"How?" she whispered. "Like the colors were wrong?"

Tibs shook his head. "Like when you tap on a shop's window hard enough to crack it, but not make it fall. They were filled with them." He shuddered. It has taken him time

to come up with a description for someone with crystal as their element that someone who didn't know what he was looking at could explain.

Tibs kept looking at his bracer, but didn't move to oil it. Not yet. Now that the eyes had been brought up, there would be more.

"I don't get it," one of the guards said. "What do you mean by that? Eyes don't do that."

Tibs had been surprised at how little people knew about adventurers, about essence, and what it did to them. The bards sang about them, but to most people, they were stories about things that weren't. Magic was real, but that it changed the people wielding it wasn't something they understood. It wasn't like any of them did more than catch sight of an adventurer in passing, if even that, and most of them had unnatural colors for their eyes, but not so much it couldn't be dismissed as not having seen correctly.

"She was one of them," she whispered, clutching something. "He was taken by the elements."

There were scoffs, but most were hesitant.

"That's not a thing," that same guard said. "It's bards' stories. Parent's tales to keep kids in line. 'Do what I say or the elements'll get you'"

Tibs never took part from that point, and now he slowly rubbed the oiled cloth over his bracer. The guards agitatedly argued over the reality of what Tibs had described, of the elements possessing people. Some even argued the elements weren't real.

That wasn't common. The beliefs around the elements varied greatly, but it was the rare place where they didn't believe in the elements themselves.

They all joined in the discussion, except Jeremy, who was eyeing Tibs with something resembling awe.